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# Experiential Knowledge: How Literacy Practices Seek to Mediate Personal and Systemic Change

Gwen Gorzelsky

**A**s a field, literacy studies has a well-established body of scholarship examining how literacy promotes systemic change or could contribute to desirable revisions of existing systems. To analyze the underlying presumptions about knowledge, literacy, and change in this scholarship, I categorize it in four strands. One strand examines the institutional uses of literacy instruction to spread ideologies associated with the nation-state and to limit marginalized groups' access to economic, political, and cultural power (Graff; Stuckey). A second strand stresses the potential of literacy education to expand the access of such groups to these goods within the existing socioeconomic order (Finders; Heath; Hicks; Mahiri; Moll and González). A third emphasizes using literacy instruction to transform the socioeconomic order through critique (Berlin; Bizzell; Freire; Giroux; Shor). A fourth strand examines how people use literacy to promote personal changes with implications for social justice (Burton; Daniell; Gere; Madden). All four strands of scholarship posit a relationship between personal and systemic change and a means by which literacy practices mediate this relationship. I analyze each strand's presumptions about how this mediation occurs to argue that literacy researchers can expand the field's conceptual tool set by focusing on what I call experiential knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

In doing so, I show that literacy mediates personal and social change through the interaction among three types of knowledge: procedural, conceptual, and experiential. Procedural knowledge entails knowing a set of steps for completing an operation. It can be explicit or tacit and often embeds presumptions about how relationships and

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systems function. Conceptual knowledge is explicit, and entails cognitive understanding of ideas or beliefs. Experiential knowledge entails both other types, though it may also operate in tension with either, and typically has both explicit and tacit aspects. I define each type more fully in the next section, where I contend that scholars should examine how specific literacy practices address experiential knowledge because this form of knowledge most directly shapes people's actions and thus our participation in larger systems.

As I demonstrate in the subsequent section, all four strands of literacy scholarship concerned with systemic change emphasize the role of personal change to some degree, and so deal implicitly with the three knowledge types. But the fourth strand, which studies literacy practices designed to foster personal changes with implications for systemic change, most explicitly reveals how revisions in procedural and conceptual knowledge can shift experiential knowledge. Thus it offers the most potential for helping researchers understand how literacy practices attempt to mediate the relationship between personal and systemic change. By analyzing a set of literacy practices designed to support personal change understood as a prerequisite for systemic change, I argue that scholars should take what I call an experiential approach to studying literacy.<sup>2</sup>

To make this case, I analyze guided meditations by Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, as this set of literacy practices focuses explicitly on changing experiential knowledge. Because this form of knowledge plays a leading role in fostering personal changes, and because Nhat Hanh holds that some personal changes have systemic implications, examining his guided meditations provides a case study that illuminates how some literacy practices use experiential knowledge both to promote personal transformation and to mediate personal and systemic change. I examine Nhat Hanh's literacy practices in their historical context to show how they encourage self-revisions designed to cultivate peace even in the midst of war. My analysis offers scholars an explanation of how some literacy practices seek to use conceptual and procedural knowledge to reshape experiential knowledge. Through this explanation, I provide researchers with a theoretical lens that reveals how literacy practices can prompt revisions of experiential knowledge. I contend that this lens illuminates literacy's most generative mechanisms for fostering individual changes with potential systemic implications.

### PROCEDURAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

These mechanisms operate in significant part through the relationship that Nhat Hanh's literacy practices establish between conceptual and procedural forms of knowledge. Scholars studying the transfer of literacy skills and knowledge from one educational context to another follow psychologists in distinguishing between these

two forms. For example, Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle stress the importance of teaching students both types of knowledge in general education writing courses. Conceptual, or declarative, knowledge entails knowing about the subject matter at hand, for instance, understanding the constructs of audience, purpose, and rhetorical situation. Procedural knowledge entails knowing how to follow a set of steps designed to produce a desired outcome, for example, how to synthesize ideas from a group of texts in drafting a summary (Downs and Wardle 577–78, 567–68). To lay the foundation for defining experiential knowledge and analyzing how the three knowledge types interact, I turn next to some key features of procedural knowledge and of a closely related concept, procedural memory.

As some literacy and writing studies scholars point out, procedural knowledge can be difficult to teach and, perhaps even more important, difficult to recognize, because it is often tacit (Gee; Smit). This implicit quality is foregrounded in James Gee's much-cited definition of literacy as proficiency in a discourse, a way of thinking, seeing, feeling, doing, and being in the world. Though he acknowledges the important role of print texts in the function of a discourse and its community of participants, Gee stresses even more these participants' interactions, particularly their uses of texts, to generate not only conceptual knowledge but also attitudes, values, modes of perception, and habitual behaviors (3–5, 104–05, 151–58). Gee holds that mastering secondary discourses outside the primary discourse learned in one's family involves some explicit instruction but depends mostly on acquisition. This process is analogous to apprenticeship, and entails extensive practice in the company of experienced users of the discourse, who model and may correct a developing user's errors, but typically do not provide explicit instruction in the workings of the discourse, which include not only expected vocabulary and syntax but also accepted topics, perspectives, attitudes, and emotional orientations. The knowledge developed through acquisition is mostly or entirely tacit (44–48, 80, 104–05, 113–14, 156–58, 169–71). As Gee's definition of discourse implies, such tacit knowledge helps shape people's attitudes, values, perceptions, emotional orientations, and behaviors. Next I show how the physiology of emotion and perception interacts with language to produce these phenomena. Understanding this interaction is essential to analyzing experiential knowledge and how literacy practices can help shape it.

The work of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio shows that emotion and subjective evaluation play an important role in generating our perceptions, evaluations, and behaviors. Damasio explains that emotions entail changes in the body state that modify the brain's representation of our well-being as living organisms. Because these representations undergird thinking, they shape perception and always involve our holistic appraisal of a situation, for instance, as a potential source of satisfaction or of distress (55). For Damasio, feelings are perceptions of our organismic state, while perception is inherently emotional and subjective (199–200). The emotions

that ground it play a significant role in decision making and are “indispensable players” in “the process of reasoning” (145). Further, long association between stimulus, emotional response, and behavioral habits make much action and decision making a rapid, automatic process. Even when rational thought occurs, it is grounded in subjective, emotionally based perceptions. The subjective, emotional roots of perception make up one of two key aspects of experiential knowledge.

The second aspect involves procedural memory, a concept closely related to procedural knowledge. To investigate how literacy practices revise experiential knowledge, literacy scholars must consider both aspects. Psychiatrist Norman Doidge explains that procedural memories often develop between ages two and three, remain subconscious or semiconscious, and guide one’s subsequent actions throughout life, usually without one’s awareness (228–29). They typically involve action sequences taken when one experiences a given emotion or drive, such as fear or sexual impulses, or encounters a particular interaction type, such as criticism or flirtation. Such memories often drive lifelong patterns one finds troublesome, difficult to explain (even to oneself), and resistant to change, such as chronically engaging in destructive romantic relationships, overcommitting, failing to seize opportunities, or losing one’s temper. Doidge presents various examples to show how therapeutic work can help patients consciously recognize and transform these memories and, as a result, revise the behavior patterns that shape their relationships and their participation in larger systems.

To describe the combination of procedural memory and the subjective, emotionally grounded nature of perceptions and cognition, I use the term experiential knowledge. As Doidge’s and Damasio’s explanations show, the components that make up experiential knowledge entail one’s subjective experience. Thus, understanding experiential knowledge is a means of understanding subjectivity. Because experiential knowledge drives perceptions and action, I contend that scholars must study how literacy interacts with it if we hope to understand how literacy brokers personal and systemic change.

My use of the term experiential knowledge in many ways parallels Abraham Maslow’s, given that he defines it as subjective knowing and contends that it forms an essential aspect of scientific knowledge (45–57). Like Nhat Hanh, Maslow emphasizes the need to develop self-understanding, thus increasing the quality and scope of one’s experiential knowledge (48–49). However, Maslow’s primary concern is to integrate experiential knowledge based on strong self-understanding into what he calls *spectator knowledge*, a clinical, objective observation of the external world from a detached viewpoint (49–52). He contends that this integration will produce a more robust version of the scientific method. As I show, Nhat Hanh’s primary concern is to provide tools that promote the kind of strong self-understanding Maslow advocates and, concomitantly, shifts in experiential knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Although

I use the term experiential knowledge much as Maslow does, my focus here is on how literacy practices can be used to foster changes in it, and thus in subjectivity, rather than on its role in scientific knowledge-making. As I show in later sections of this article, some scholars see the relationship between literacy and subjectivity as the key to understanding how literacy practices mediate personal and systemic change. Given that experiential knowledge provides a window into subjectivity, I argue that researchers must investigate the interaction between literacy practices and experiential knowledge to study this mediation.

Based on my analysis of Nhat Hanh's guided meditations, I show that the literacy practices they elicit enable practitioners to make conscious both procedural memories and the subjective grounding of their perceptions and actions. Like Doidge, Nhat Hanh says that this conscious recognition changes habitual behaviors. He contends that such changes restructure one's personal relationships and help revise larger systems by reshaping individuals' participation in them. By examining Nhat Hanh's literacy practices, I show how they seek to leverage systemic change by cultivating personal self-revision. First, though, I discuss literacy scholars' views of systemic change to illustrate how analyzing Nhat Hanh's guided meditations can extend existing work on literacy and change.

#### FOUR VIEWS OF LITERACY AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Conceptual, procedural, and experiential knowledge factor implicitly or explicitly in how researchers from each of the four strands of scholarship just described conceptualize the role of literacy in fostering social change. For example, Harvey Graff, a key representative of the first strand, documents the use of literacy education in the nineteenth-century United States for "assimilation and sociocultural cohesion," an effort targeting particularly immigrants and the poor (212). Graff debunks the "literacy myth," which claimed that schooling promoted economic survival (214). He shows that it instead functioned to provide an obedient, trained workforce and to inculcate white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant attitudes and values in African American, Roman Catholic, Southern and Eastern European immigrant, and other non-mainstream children (228). Graff attributes these effects to public schools' curriculum, which was "permeated with pan-Protestant, American norms, values, and attitudes" that conveyed a "moral, civic, and social" message (215). Thus he presumes that conceptual knowledge, provided through direct instruction in such norms, shapes the collection of attitudes, perceptions, and emotional-behavioral responses entailed in experiential knowledge. But he does not consider how concepts might exert such influence nor, in fact, whether they actually do so.

Researchers in the second strand of scholarship on literacy and change don't use the terminology of conceptual, procedural, and experiential knowledge but do

address all three types, as exemplified in Shirley Brice Heath's foundational work. Heath carefully documents the substantial differences in the procedural knowledge about literacy developed by children in three Carolina Piedmont communities: a mainstream community instilling middle-class values regarding education, an African American working-class community, and a white working-class community. Heath's ethnographic analysis shows that middle-class children enter school well prepared to succeed academically because their parents have read them stories, asked them to provide factual and imaginative answers, and modeled work with texts—all procedures they're required to undertake in school (Heath 247–60). In contrast, African American working-class children learn to spin tall tales and engage in poetic playsongs, but get neither direct instruction in literacy learning nor adult modeling of individual work with texts (167–84, 190–201). Because they do not have the procedural knowledge that middle-class children bring, and because their experiential knowledge prompts them to interact in ways that teachers view as disrespectful, they quickly enter a pattern of academic failure (278–80). White working-class children learn storytelling, question-and-answer, and reading habits shaped by moralistic norms and an emphasis on a single correct interpretation provided by an authority figure (138–44, 149–65, 226–30). Their procedural knowledge of literacy prompts them toward passive listening and a “listen and learn and repeat” pattern, while their experiential knowledge sparks anxiety or resistance when they're asked to produce fictive stories or to elaborate (226, 301–04). Heath develops teaching approaches that respect the experiential knowledge each group brings to school, while drawing on their existing procedural and conceptual knowledge to help them gain access to the knowledge that school offers, and thus to the socioeconomic and cultural goods it can afford.

In contrast, scholars in strand three urge students to change the existing socioeconomic order, rather than to succeed within it. James Berlin's work represents such efforts, as suggested in his claim that English courses in higher education should prepare students to participate in democratic public discourse by teaching them to analyze how “literary and rhetorical forms and genres are involved in ideological conflict” (107). Because such texts play an important role in shaping the social order and the perceptions and discourses that sustain it, he argues, students must learn to examine how texts do this work. Thus they will “become active agents of social and political change” (112). To promote this work, teachers will often need to confront students' denial of privilege and social conflicts (113). In gesturing toward the need to confront denial, Berlin tacitly, and very briefly, acknowledges the role of experiential knowledge in shaping perceptions, emotional responses, and behaviors. But he focuses on using the procedural and conceptual knowledge of textual analysis to pursue social critique, and presumes that by “confronting” students' divergent views with reason, teachers will prompt them to work toward social justice (112).

Subsequent critiques of critical pedagogy, from those on the right (Smith) to those in the center (Durst; Wallace and Ewald) to those on the left (Lindquist; Seitz), stress the disjuncture between students' experience and the conceptual and procedural knowledge of social critique. Thus questions of experiential knowledge become pressing as scholars consider how literacy mediates personal and systemic change. These questions appear explicitly in strand four.

Although this strand represents fewer scholars than do the other strands, its texts make a striking contribution, for instance in Beth Daniell's *A Communion of Friendship*, which examines the literacy practices of women in Al-Anon, a twelve-step group for the spouses of alcoholics. Like other strand-four scholars (Burton; Madden), Daniell focuses on how literacy practices shift users' holistic experience. Her research subjects "write to come to terms with their emotions, with cultural expectations, and with other people's rules [. . .] to negotiate their identities [. . .] and to gain power" (39). For example, as part of their Al-Anon work, they complete the "searching and fearless moral inventory" required by the organization's step four, a process Daniell says helps them examine their values and behaviors (39, 40). Jill, one research participant, describes how her fourth-step inventory helped her to recognize and take responsibility for a decision to hate her stepfather, who had kicked her. Describing the realization as significantly healing, "a real spiritual awakening," Jill says that writing the inventory helped her to see and transform the effects of this decision on her self-esteem and personal relationships (Daniell 44-45). The work Jill did to draft her inventory involved both the procedural knowledge she needed to compose in this genre and the conceptual knowledge she needed to reframe prior events, but its focus was, as her description indicates, on shifting the experiential knowledge that undergirded her perceptions, emotions, and behaviors.

Though Daniell is careful to explain that participation in Al-Anon did not bring about significant material changes in most research participants' lives, she notes that Jill earned her master's degree and took a position as a social worker, in part as the result of her twelve-step work (145). Daniell suggests the importance of such changes, given that alcoholism exacerbates the gender exploitation often prevalent in families (73). She concludes that the "politics" practiced by her research subjects "may be revolutionary, but it is at the same time a domestic kind of politics" (148). Still, "it may well be the profoundest kind, because it is in families where fundamental change in the relationships between men and women occurs, where, in fact, the next generation learns how power is to be used [. . .] politics at its most basic is what happens between human beings" (148). Thus Daniell positions literacy as a fulcrum that uses procedural and conceptual knowledge to shift experiential knowledge. Because changes in experiential knowledge revise people's participation in family, educational, and economic institutions, strand-four scholars suggest they can contribute to systemic change. These scholars show how some literacy practices seek to mediate such personal and social revisions.



### LITERACY AND EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

While Daniell suggests this mediating role for literacy practices, James Collins and Richard Blot offer a useful framework for considering how it occurs. They argue that scholars should examine the relationship between the personal effects of literacy practices, which they discuss in terms of identity formation or subjectivity, and the systemic effects, which they discuss in terms of power. Collins and Blot contend that researchers should consider how the power in literacy intersects with knowledge and identity formation (65–66). Because historical case studies combine ethnography’s focus on local, everyday practices with large-scale studies’ emphasis on how literacy relates to changing economic and political conditions, Collins and Blot recommend such case studies as especially useful (67). They suggest that historical case studies enable researchers to chart the “techniques of power and subjectivity” inherent in various literacy practices (68). Their analysis of several historical case studies reveals the use of literacy practices both to promote domination of one group by another and to help subordinated groups pursue liberatory goals. Collins and Blot’s approach raises two questions about how literacy practices construct identities. First, how do these practices prompt personal changes significant enough to (re)shape identities? Second, how do they position such self-revisions in relation to systemic change? In the sections that follow, I combine Collins and Blot’s historical case study approach with the framework of experiential knowledge to address these questions.

I argue that investigating how literacy practices guide people’s work with conceptual and procedural knowledge to revise experiential knowledge provides insight into literacy practices’ “techniques of power and subjectivity” (Collins and Blot 68). Such revisions of experiential knowledge reshape subjectivity. Scholarship in all four strands of work on literacy and social change implicitly or explicitly presumes the importance of experiential knowledge in shaping individuals’ participation in larger systems, and thus the systems themselves. Therefore, examining how literacy practices promote changes in experiential knowledge to (re)shape subjectivity offers insight into one posited explanation of how literacy seeks to mediate individual and systemic change. Nhat Hanh’s literacy practices provide an ideal case study for pursuing this examination because an analysis offers extended answers to Collins and Blot’s questions about how literacy practices prompt personal changes and how they position these self-revisions in relation to systemic change.

As Damasio’s description of the subjective evaluations grounding perception and Doidge’s discussion of procedural memory show, these revisions require a substantial investment of time and effort. Because the components of experiential knowledge take root in subjective physiological responses and long-term habits, such efforts require sustained work with both conceptual and procedural knowledge. Nhat Hanh’s literacy practices guide meditators in undertaking this work, often with a direct focus on both physiological-emotional states and established habits, both behavioral and

perceptual. Analyzing these practices reveals that literacy practices seeking to foster change in experiential knowledge must function in several ways.

First, literacy practices must provide a conceptual framework for interpreting one's individual experience and one's relation to larger systems in terms of a relatively cohesive set of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Second, they must teach users the procedural knowledge needed to identify and reinterpret key aspects of their experiential knowledge through this conceptual framework. Finally, they must provide users with the procedural knowledge required to retrain their emotional and behavioral habits to align with the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the conceptual framework. By showing scholars how these three functions of literacy practices promote significant personal changes, my analysis of Nhat Hanh's guided meditations offers a new framework for theorizing the relationship between literacy and change. This framework focuses researchers' attention on how literacy practices seek to shift experiential knowledge. It extends strand-four scholars' implicit presumptions that such shifts revise subjectivity and that subjectivity shapes our participation in larger systems. Because Nhat Hanh's guided meditations explicitly promote such shifts and link personal self-revisions with systemic change, studying his literacy practices offers scholars a richer understanding of how literacy reshapes experiential knowledge to mediate personal and systemic change.

Although the literacy practices Daniell's research subjects use to undertake this effort involve both reading and writing, Nhat Hanh's guided meditations elicit primarily reading to help practitioners apply both conceptual and procedural knowledge. Yet, following Gee's definition of literacy as proficiency in a discourse (a way of thinking, seeing, feeling, doing, and being in the world), I argue that the activities the guided meditations prompt are still literacy practices. I make this case for two reasons. First, use of the guided meditation texts enables meditators to put into practice the various kinds of procedural knowledge these texts teach. Many guided meditations involve a long, complex set of steps. Only by continually revisiting the written text can meditators make their way through this cumulative series. Thus, use of the text plays an essential role in facilitating meditators' acquisition of new procedural knowledge. Second, the guided meditation texts are embedded in longer philosophical explanations of the underlying principles of Zen practice.<sup>4</sup> These explanations appear both in books of guided meditations and in other volumes, which the meditations reference. Reading and rereading such explanations of Zen's foundational ideas enables meditators to situate their developing procedural knowledge within a conceptual framework that often differs radically from their prior worldviews. In the next section, I describe how the guided meditations structure meditators' work with conceptual and procedural knowledge.

### USING CONCEPTUAL AND PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE

Often spanning several pages of written text, guided meditations provide practitioners with detailed instructions in developing procedural knowledge designed to address various circumstances, from minor disappointments to serious losses. Through tools such as focused awareness, self-reflection, and sustained visualization, these meditations provide procedural knowledge that practitioners use to identify their own perceptual, cognitive, and emotional patterns. Further, they teach procedural knowledge for reinterpreting these patterns in terms of the conceptual frame they and other Zen texts provide. Finally, they instruct practitioners in the procedural knowledge needed to revise these patterns to form emotional and behavioral habits more in keeping with the attitudes and values Zen promotes. By teaching practitioners to reorient their responses to their own subjectively grounded perceptions and to their emotional and behavioral habits, the guided meditations enable practitioners to reconstruct these habits.

Examining the various types of guided meditation reveals how the texts lead users through such efforts. I've identified four categories of meditation exercises in Nhat Hanh's two most comprehensive collections of guided meditations in English, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and *The Blooming of a Lotus*.<sup>5</sup> The first category asks practitioners to undertake step-by-step visualizations designed to generate calm and relaxation, and then encourages practitioners to focus on this state as the foundation of peace and joy in the present moment. The second emphasizes focusing mindful attention on negative emotions and mental states to generate insights that help transform these states into more positive ones.<sup>6</sup> The third encourages a felt understanding of the ideas of emptiness and interdependence. *Emptiness* is the Zen term for the belief that no one has an inherent nature separate from the multiple causes and conditions (from the genetic to the familial, political, economic, cultural, and ecological) that produced one's "self." *Interdependence* is the Zen term for the relations among such multiple causes and conditions. The fourth category builds on the earlier ones to cultivate compassion and effective action designed to relieve suffering and promote well-being for all.

Each category seeks to revise experiential knowledge. All four categories teach procedural knowledge for developing awareness of one's emotional, physiological, and perceptual state and for responding to that state in ways designed to transform it. For example, the exercises for dealing with negative emotional or mental states often guide the meditator in using literacy practices to actually elicit difficult emotions. Such an exercise may ask him to visualize the death of a loved one or circumstances that sparked anger. Next, the exercise leads him through steps for developing a perspective that will help him transform the emotion elicited. After visualizing the death of a loved one, for instance, the meditator may be asked to consider the fragility of life,

to contemplate which of current stresses will be significant a century hence, and to consider the preciousness of his loved one's life. Finally, he is led to appreciate the value of that life, and of his interactions with his beloved, in the present moment. Thus, like the other exercises, those in category two guide the meditator in developing complex procedural knowledge for addressing potentially destructive emotions.

In addition to enabling practitioners to navigate a series of complex, emotionally demanding steps, use of the meditations' written texts facilitates the process of undertaking significant shifts in perspective. As Damasio's explanation of the subjective bases of perception illustrates, such shifts entail changes in one's physiological and emotional states, as well as a revision in one's thinking. Returning repeatedly to the guided meditations' written instructions enables the practitioner to work as slowly and recursively as necessary through this disorienting process. Because the meditations introduce conceptual knowledge—for instance, ideas on emptiness and interdependence—they offer practitioners an understanding of why to pursue the procedural knowledge they teach, and of how it will allow practitioners to revise both their own state of being and their relations to other people and larger systems. Because they introduce procedural knowledge, the meditations offer practitioners a means of pursuing the changes in experiential knowledge needed to put such new conceptual knowledge into practice, rather than absorbing it at a strictly cognitive level. I illustrate the importance of such holistic change by situating Nhat Hanh's literacy practices in their historical context.

#### WRITING PEACE IN A SEA OF FIRE: WAR AS CRUCIBLE OF LITERACY PRACTICES

Describing war generally as the result of social injustices, such as economic exploitation and political repression, Nhat Hanh attributes the Vietnam War specifically to a complex set of such issues. The northern Communists sought social justice for Vietnam's impoverished peasants, the great majority of the nation's population, and had helped win Vietnam's independence from French colonial rule in 1954. The southern military dictatorship, held in place by US support, sought to block Communist expansion, and by 1963, the United States had stationed 548,000 troops and dropped 643,000 tons of bombs in Vietnam (Prados 25, 192; Topmiller, 4). In its zeal to stop the spread of communism, the United States tolerated torture and human rights abuses in South Vietnam, despite extensive documentation by Americans (Fitzgerald 89–90; Hassler 65–97; Topmiller 93, 95). In his 1967 book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, which addresses US readers, Nhat Hanh describes the result as a society dissolving into chaos and misery. Whole villages were relocated into “strategic hamlets” to prevent North Vietnamese infiltration, while others were bombed, forcing peasant refugees into overcrowded cities, where they encountered corruption, war profiteering, and poverty. Nhat Hanh describes widespread near-starvation,

children scavenging in garbage dumps, and young girls prostituting themselves to feed their families (*Vietnam* 74–75).

While many Buddhist monks took part in protests seeking to force democratic elections in South Vietnam, prompting conflict even among Buddhist leaders themselves (Topmiller 7–8, 128–29), Nhat Hanh focused instead on efforts to relieve suffering and promote peace. He started an underground press that published poetry and essays advocating peace, and he founded the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), which established hospitals, schools, and relief programs for refugees and war victims (Chân Không 72–75; Nhat Hahn, *Vietnam* 77; Topmiller 138). Both North and South Vietnamese regimes accused him of collaborating with the other and violently harassed SYSS workers, killing some, and attempting to assassinate Nhat Hanh, who was exiled when he traveled to the West in the mid-1960s to advocate for peace (Nhat Hahn, *Vietnam* 77; Chân Không 88; Hassler 54–55; Prados 100, 138). He wrote *The Miracle of Mindfulness* from exile in Paris as a long letter to SYSS workers, who were often, as the translator explains in her preface, at the brink of exhaustion and bitterness. She notes that Nhat Hanh wrote to help them practice mindfulness “even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances” (*Miracle* viii).

In a book written later, Nhat Hanh explains the necessity of such efforts for people pursuing peace work in the midst of war. Pointing out that no one-size-fits-all advice can prepare one to confront violence effectively, he says, “[A]t the crucial moment, even if you know that nonviolence is better than violence, if your understanding is only intellectual and not in your whole being, you will not act nonviolently. The fear and anger in you will prevent you from acting in the most nonviolent way” (*Love* 71). This statement implies the key role of experiential knowledge in the kind of self-revision Nhat Hanh advocates. Using an example, he shows why experiential, and not only conceptual, understanding is crucial. He describes a young monk who risked his life by moving across the line of fire during a 1968 battle to successfully persuade opposing military commanders to suspend bombing so wounded civilians could be moved to a safer location. In such situations, Nhat Hanh concludes, “[Y]ou have to be extremely mindful. Sometimes you have to react quickly while remaining calm, but if you were angry or suspicious, you could not do this [. . .] Nonviolent action is born naturally from compassion, lucidity, and understanding within yourself” (*Creating True Peace* 87). To show how his guided meditations elicit literacy practices that foster such changes in experiential knowledge, I analyze an exercise designed to help the practitioner cultivate a holistic understanding of others’ suffering.

### REVISING EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

This exercise, titled Suffering Caused by the Lack of Wisdom, teaches procedural knowledge through which practitioners apply their developing conceptual knowledge, with the goal of generating changes in experiential knowledge. It is from the last of

the four categories of meditation exercises described earlier, the type designed to cultivate compassion and prompt action to relieve suffering. The work that category-four exercises ask meditators to undertake seems to presuppose practice with exercises in categories one through three, which help the practitioner cultivate calmness and relaxation, transform negative emotions, and encourage an experiential understanding of the ideas of emptiness and interdependence. The exercises in these categories, especially categories one and two, significantly outnumber those in category four. Further, exercises in the fourth category appear later in the two collections of guided meditations. The work required by exercises in categories one through three thus seems to lay the foundation for that elicited by category-four exercises, including *Suffering Caused by the Lack of Wisdom*.

This guided meditation first asks the practitioner to visualize a person who is suffering and to consider all aspects of that suffering: bodily (for instance from “sickness, poverty, physical pain”); emotional (from “internal conflicts, fear, hatred, jealousy, a tortured conscience”); perceptual (from “pessimism, dwelling on his problems with a dark and narrow viewpoint”); or cognitive (from thoughts “motivated by fear, discouragement, despair, or hatred”) (Nhat Hahn, *Miracle* 94). Next the exercise directs the practitioner to “meditate on all these sufferings until your heart fills with compassion [. . .] and you are able to see that the person suffers because of circumstances and ignorance” (94). In its emphasis on practicing until one’s “heart fills with compassion,” the text names as its goal a change in experiential knowledge, as marked by a shift in the practitioner’s emotional response to the stimulus offered by the visualization. Damasio’s explanation of the role of emotions in shaping perception suggests that, once achieved, such an emotional shift must correlate with a change in perception as well.

Once the practitioner has developed her initial visualization, the exercise asks her to extend her efforts by picturing a family experiencing suffering. In doing so, the exercise draws on the Zen concepts of emptiness and interdependence, using the specific example unfolded in the visualization to help the practitioner revise her experiential knowledge. To direct this work, the text instructs, “[S]ee that [the family’s] sufferings are your own. See that it is not possible to reproach even one person in that group” (Nhat Hahn, *Miracle* 94–95). These lines invoke the ideas of interdependence by pointing out that the practitioner shares these sufferings, and by implying one of Nhat Hanh’s central tenets, namely that blame or reproach are never appropriate because suffering is caused by a combination of external circumstances and lack of knowledge. By applying these ideas in interpreting the nature and causes of others’ suffering, the practitioner implements procedural knowledge (of visualizing and interpreting) designed to help her internalize the exercise’s conceptual knowledge (of emptiness and interdependence).

The process involved and the relationship between the two types of knowledge are both complex. The instructions to “see that [the family’s] sufferings are your

own” and “see that it is not possible to reproach even one person” invoke important dimensions of the ideas of emptiness and interdependence. The Zen view of emptiness presumes that each person contains all aspects of existence, including both the most life-enhancing and the most destructive qualities, though only some of those qualities manifest in current circumstances. Thus the exercise implicitly asks the practitioner to call to mind instances when circumstances have prompted negative qualities to manifest in herself, and to use the insight generated by that effort to understand that the suffering family has, similarly, encountered circumstances that fostered counterproductive tendencies. The Zen view of interdependence presumes that no one is individually responsible for his or her own situation, good or bad, but rather that other people and larger circumstances both fundamentally shape that individual’s experience. The exercise implicitly asks the practitioner to recall the many factors outside the family’s control that have contributed to its members’ suffering.

By using the procedure of the directed visualization, the practitioner thus reshapes her interpretation of the nature and causes of the family’s suffering. As she does so, she considers aspects of the situation she may not have seen previously, especially aspects likely to shift her emotional responses and thus her perception. By eliciting this work, the text positions the practitioner to extend the shift in experiential knowledge gained in visualizing an individual’s suffering. Thus, by applying these Zen concepts using the procedure of the visualization, the practitioner learns to understand the complexity of intersecting causes at levels ranging from the individual to the microsystems of family and community. Next, I explain how she expands this work to include the macrosystems of political and economic institutions. In doing so, she transforms emotional responses and perceptual habits that prompt her to blame others for suffering.

Nhat Hanh offers an example from his own practice with this directed visualization exercise to illustrate how using it can prompt the kind of change in experiential knowledge he advocates. He includes this example in various texts and while leading retreats. First, he describes reading a letter recounting the rape and subsequent suicide of a young Vietnamese refugee and the murder of her father, who tried to prevent the violence against her. Because Nhat Hanh led a group providing relief to the thousands of Vietnamese who fled their country, often in unseaworthy vessels, after South Vietnam fell, he knew that it typified attacks by Thai pirates on these refugees. To address his own intense anger and pain, the Zen teacher explains, he practiced sitting and walking meditation and the visualizations described earlier.

Next, he illustrates by describing life on the coast of Thailand and the probable circumstances of the pirate’s upbringing. His account depicts a young man raised by an uneducated mother in delinquency, without schooling, and with no hope of escaping a life of grueling poverty. The temptation to steal from refugees fleeing with what valuables they could carry was likely to be too strong for such a young man, Nhat Hanh says. Further, responsibility for the crime extends beyond the

person who committed it to include educators, health professionals, political and economic leaders, and others who support the status quo rather than work to alleviate the poverty and suffering that shaped the young man (*Keeping the Peace* 77–79).

After several hours of practice, the Zen teacher notes, he had succeeded in generating compassion for the man who committed the crime: “I had transformed my anger through visualization,” he concludes (*Keeping the Peace* 77). By using exercises for dealing with difficult emotions and also the procedures for undertaking visualization to generate compassion advocated in *Suffering Caused by the Lack of Wisdom*, the Zen teacher reoriented his focus from his own anger at the refugees’ suffering to a systemic explanation of its causes implicit in key Zen concepts. As a result, he prompted an important shift in his experiential knowledge.

Nhat Hanh often notes that such moments of enlightenment typically occur after sustained mindfulness practice. Although the meditator may experience the shift as sudden, it results from consistent practice over time. Such experiential shifts may be linked to evidence provided by recent neurological studies, which show that long-term meditation practice produces structural change in some brain areas and heightened activity in others. For instance, Alberto Chiesa, Paolo Brambilla, and Alessandro Serretti’s research demonstrates that meditating consistently enables practitioners to more effectively regulate activity in the amygdala, a brain region that processes fear and other negative emotions, and to more effectively detach from such emotions (113). Similarly, Dennis Tirsch’s analysis of earlier neurological studies shows that meditation practice thickens brain regions linked to attention, emotional regulation, attachment, conflict resolution, and care giving. I suggest that the shift in experiential knowledge that Nhat Hanh describes may be enabled by the changes in brain structure and activity that these studies show result from long-term meditation practice.

I contend that such changes should interest literacy researchers because an analysis of Nhat Hanh’s guided meditations reveals that literacy may play a key role in facilitating them. By helping practitioners use Zen conceptual knowledge to reinterpret their perceptions, judgments, and emotions, Nhat Hanh’s literacy practices till the soil for shifts in experiential knowledge. By helping practitioners retrain their perceptual and emotional habits, the literacy practices cultivate the conditions for such shifts to manifest. The story of Nhat Hanh’s shift in experiential knowledge illustrates the type of work the Zen teacher says enabled the young monk to cross a battlefield and negotiate a temporary cease-fire to protect civilians.

Such work at the individual and family level extends to the societal level in the final section of *Suffering Caused by the Lack of Wisdom*. That section directs the practitioner to consider a nation undergoing war “or any other situation of injustice” (Nhat Hahn, *Miracle* 95). Once again, the instructions guide him toward a holistic understanding of interdependence, exhorting him to



[s]ee that no person, including all those in warring parties or in what appear to be opposing sides, desires the suffering to continue. See that it is not only one or a few persons who are to blame for the situation. See that the situation is possible because of the clinging to ideologies and to an unjust world economic system[,] which is upheld by every person through ignorance or through a lack of resolve to change it. See that two sides in a conflict are not really opposing, but two aspects of the same reality. See that the most essential thing is life and that killing or oppressing one another will not solve anything. (95)

The exercise concludes by instructing the practitioner to meditate “until every reproach and hatred disappears,” until compassion arises spontaneously, and to vow to try to help the sufferer(s) “by the most silent and unpretentious means possible” (Nhat Hahn, *Miracle* 96). Thus the exercise guides the practitioner through three levels: individual, family, and nation, moving from the most concrete opportunity for empathy and personal engagement to the most abstract, and therefore most challenging, instance. In its concluding lines, the exercise links its goal of shifting experiential knowledge, in transforming “reproach and hatred” into compassion, with a goal of revised behaviors, namely seeking and implementing ways to alleviate suffering. Thus it exemplifies the efforts that Nhat Hanh’s literacy practices make to mediate personal and systemic change.

Considering this exercise in light of the historical circumstances that prompted its writing illuminates Nhat Hanh’s view of how to use literacy practices to effect such mediation. Such analysis reveals several key aspects of his approach. First, it is designed to address emotions reaching the intensity of those evoked in situations of extreme duress. Second, the approach emphasizes the high stakes attached to this work, as in the case of the young monk who negotiated the cease-fire. Finally, it offers successful examples of such efforts, as in the instance of the Zen teacher’s use of guided meditations to transform his anger and pain in response to the violence against Vietnamese refugees. By using literacy practices so explicitly and extensively to prompt shifts in experiential knowledge, Nhat Hanh offers the basis for developing a new analytic framework for examining claims regarding how literacy practices promote systemic change. That is, by foregrounding the decisive role of experiential knowledge in guiding perceptions, emotions, and behavior, Nhat Hanh’s work reveals the need for literacy scholars to broaden our focus to consider conceptual and procedural knowledge less as prime movers and more as tools that shape experiential knowledge. At the same time, his work highlights literacy scholars’ need to investigate more deeply how changes in subjectivity contribute to revising larger systems.

Like Heath and other scholars seeking to afford marginalized groups access within the existing socioeconomic order, Nhat Hanh works to address socioeconomic and cultural inequities. To these scholars’ efforts, he adds a conceptual system designed to revise the systemic inequities inherent in that order. Like Berlin, Nhat

Hanh provides literacy practices that help learners develop compassionate understanding of how all factions, no matter how privileged or violent, are caught in this system's operations without awareness of how to change it. To Berlin's and other critical pedagogy scholars' efforts, he adds crucial methods for addressing learners' emotional and perceptual investments in that system. Like the literacy practices that foster personal change with systemic implications studied by strand-four scholars, Nhat Hanh's exercises guide learners to undertake substantial self-revision. Like Daniell, Nhat Hanh positions such efforts as a means to address the systemic injustices perpetuated by large-scale institutions, ideologies, and practices, such as those driving the Vietnam War.

Further, considering these literacy practices in their historical context reveals a view of the relations between identity (re)construction and power that transcends Collins and Blot's binary between resistance and co-optation. Nhat Hanh's literacy practices prompt extensive personal shifts by embedding new perspectives in procedures for addressing intense emotional, embodied responses like fear and rage. They do so by asking practitioners to use this procedural work to apply key ideas from a conceptual system that posits not a conflictual relationship with dominant groups, but rather one that seeks reconciliation based in social justice. By helping learners retrain their perceptions of the causes of suffering, Nhat Hanh's literacy practices promote revised emotional responses.

Practitioners work to shift their conceptual framework from notions of victims, oppressors, and heroes to evaluations of actions understood as more or less skillful in promoting reconciliation. They practice working with intense emotional responses even to extreme situations and thus develop a compassionate understanding of each group linked to any set of circumstances. By practicing efforts to understand how each group's actions are shaped by misperceptions, they work to appreciate that group's higher aspirations. By cultivating this understanding, practitioners seek to replace arguments for the ethical primacy of any single group's claims with efforts to promote genuine reconciliation grounded in social justice. In fostering such self-revisions, these literacy practices work to establish a relation between personal and systemic change that has been named by scholars like Daniell but that requires significantly more investigation. This suggested relationship offers scholars an illuminating new lens for considering whether and how literacy practices might promote personal changes with implications for systemic change. By inviting researchers to analyze how literacy practices work with conceptual and procedural knowledge to (re)shape experiential knowledge, this lens provides a richer view of how literacy effects individual change. By asking scholars to consider how such personal shifts may revise people's participation in larger systems, it affords a more nuanced representation of subjectivity, one that considers how literacy may mediate between the individual (from her physiology to her emotional and behavioral habits) and larger social practices (from consumption to civic and political participation).

### CONCLUSION: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO LITERACY STUDIES

To better investigate both how literacy promotes individual change and how such personal self-revisions may contribute to systemic change, I contend that scholars should develop an experiential approach to studying literacy practices. Such an approach would build on the sociocultural approach pioneered by Gee, Heath, Street, and others. Like the sociocultural approach, it would consider how literacy practices construct identities and communal norms and habits. But like Daniell's work, it would also extend that approach by focusing on experiential knowledge, rather than positioning conceptual or procedural knowledge as primary change agents. This focus would help researchers learn more precisely how literacy brokers significant individual change because, as Damasio's and Doidge's work illustrates, experiential knowledge, rather than conceptual or procedural knowledge, directly shapes behavior in both routine and crisis situations. Using experiential knowledge as an analytic lens would enable scholars to better examine how literacy practices modulate the physiological and emotional factors that ground perception and action. By offering a window into how literacy may (re)shape these factors, the experiential approach offers an important set of insights into the relationship between literacy and subjectivity.

Jennifer Seibel Trainor's work in composition studies stresses the new recognition that subjectivity operates through experiential understanding (which she discusses as *emotioned rules*). In turn, experiential understanding functions through institutional and other systemic forces, which both structure individual identities and are themselves shaped by subjectivity, as expressed through collective habits of perception and behavior. By illuminating more fully how literacy practices construct subjectivity, the experiential approach offers insight into how individuals interact with—and may revise—larger systems. Thus this lens reveals how literacy practices seek to mediate personal identity construction, institutional power, and larger social practices.

I suggest that an experiential approach might operate from two grounding theoretical assumptions. First, investigating personal and systemic changes requires studying shifts in people's experiential, as well as conceptual and procedural, knowledge. Second, such study requires developing methods and methodologies for investigating the revisions in learners' holistic (emotional, perceptual, embodied, and conceptual) experiences as they develop proficiency in new literacy practices. Multiple research methods are required for such inquiry. For instance, qualitative, historical, and textual research might usefully work in dialogue with recent neuroscience investigations of the effects on the brain resulting from meditation and other endeavors guided by literacy practices.<sup>7</sup> Charting the individual and community changes linked to developing proficiency in new literacy practices may reveal the extent to which observed changes match those attributed to the literacy practices in question.

Researchers should investigate these questions in a wide range of literacy practices, from spiritual, educational, and academic to professional, political, and leisure. Studies should establish how a given set of literacy practices constructs the relationship between personal and systemic change, and should investigate the experiential changes that actually correlate with developing proficiency. By comparing the construction with documented experiential changes, researchers will learn more precisely how literacy operates through institutions and larger social practices to shape individual identities and, possibly, how people may use such practices to restructure larger systems. For instance, analyzing this construction in Nhat Hanh's literacy practices reveals his emphasis on cultivating a particular set of experiential changes as the broker between individual and systemic change. Examining the constructions in other literacy practices will reveal different emphases. Further, by comparing the documented changes linked to various literacy practices, researchers will better understand what changes literacy promotes, and how. Such studies may help scholars to learn more concretely whether and how literacy practices do in fact mediate personal and systemic change.

## NOTES

1. My sincere thanks to Beth Burmester, Rita Malenczyk, Kelly Ritter, John Schilb, and the anonymous *College English* reviewers for very helpful feedback on drafts of this article.

2. While I believe that this argument has implications for teachers, students, and other literacy learners, particularly with respect to developing proficiency in what Gee calls secondary discourses that conflict with one's primary discourse and with respect to promoting transfer of writing-related skills and knowledge, I don't have space to address these implications here. Further, additional literacy research using an experiential approach is needed to flesh out these implications.

3. Drawing on his synthesis of John Dewey's, Kurt Lewin's and Jean Piaget's uses of the same term, David Kolb defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (38). This definition certainly encompasses changes in experiential knowledge, and the characteristics Kolb derives from his three sources (learning as process versus product, as grounded in continuous revision of individual experience, as dialectical resolution of conflicting modes of knowing, as holistic adaptation, as transaction between individual and environment, and as process of knowledge creation) overlap significantly with the characteristics of changes in experiential knowledge (25–38). From a broad perspective, such changes are essential to experiential learning as Kolb and his sources define it. That is, experiential learning requires shifts in conceptions of one's relationship to self, others, and environment, as these shifts intersect with emotional, perceptual, and cognitive habits. These shifts are what I call changes in experiential knowledge. But Kolb's definition of experiential learning encompasses other forms of change as well, for instance, developing the ability to use artistic, scientific, or philosophical methods. Though I believe that changes in experiential knowledge are integral to the process of developing such abilities, this development involves a wider set of shifts not included in my discussion of changes in experiential knowledge. Therefore, I decided not to use the term experiential learning, for fear of causing confusion about my focus, particularly for readers familiar with Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler's persuasive argument for using Dewey's definition of experiential learning as a foundational concept in theorizing and researching service-learning (79–80).

4. Like many Zen texts, Nhat Hanh's writings use key Zen concepts, such as interdependence and emptiness, defined later in this article, while repeatedly warning practitioners not to get caught in conceptual understanding.

5. I categorize and analyze the literacy practices elicited by the sixty-six guided meditations in these two collections in an article and a book-length project I'm now drafting.

6. Zen teachers advocate mindfulness, a focus on the present moment achieved by returning one's mind to current circumstances when it wanders to reminiscence, worry, anticipation, or daydreaming. Like other Zen teachers, Nhat Hahn positions mindfulness as a crucial change agent that eventually transforms fear, anger, and other negative states into positive ones by prompting insights into one's connections with the larger social and ecological environment.

7. I discuss the experiential approach and relevant methodological concerns in "An Experiential Approach to Literacy Studies." I argue for research studies that combine traditional literacy studies research methods with neuroscientific methods in "Literacy in a Biocultural World."

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